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SUBJECT: (C) MUSLIM LEADERS IN LYON STRESS UNITY AT REGIONAL LEVEL, IN CONTRAST TO DYSFUNCTIONAL CFCM (C-DI5-01478)

REF: PARIS 3716

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Bruce Turner, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Leaders of the regional Muslim Council (CRCM) in Rhone-Alpes stressed a message of unity and moderation during a joint meeting with poloff in Lyon May 31.

The CRCM leaders, who represent three rival factions within the national French Council for the Muslim Faith (CFCM), stressed their determination to work together to foster a moderate French Islam, free of foreign influence and funding.

They also emphasized the need to reinterpret the Qur'an to bring it in line with the 21st century and European mores, and described inter-faith dialogue as an obligation for all Muslims. The CRCM leaders floated the idea of taxes on halal meat sales or travel of French hajj pilgrims to Mecca as possible ways to fund religious projects locally. The CRCM leaders also identified mosque construction as a pressing priority, and cited two major mosque construction projects which they claimed were funded entirely from domestic funds. The CRCM leaders affirmed eagerness for greater dialogue with the USG, and posed numerous questions on Muslims in the U.S., the U.S. immigrant experience, and U.S. foreign policy. End summary.

¶2. (C) During a May 30-31 public diplomacy outreach trip to Lyon, poloff met with representatives of the Rhone-Alpes Regional Council for the Muslim Faith (CRCM), including local leaders from the Union for Islamic Organizations in France (UOIF), Algerian-backed Paris Grand Mosque affiliates, and the Morocco-backed National French Muslim Federation (FMNF). It was the first time emboffs attended such a group meeting with the three leading groups within the national French Council for the Muslim Faith (CFCM), which has been plagued by internal rivalries between these organizations since its 2003 launch. Most of the discussion was led by UOIF representative/CRCM President Azzedine Gaci, a Franco-Algerian physics professor apparently in his mid-40's who has served as the regional CRCM president since early 2005.

¶3. (C) In contrast to Paris-based CFCM leaders, the Rhone-Alpes CRCM representatives sought to present a unified front to poloff, stressing a common interest in fostering a uniquely French Islam, free from the interference of foreign governments and the GoF, and relevant to daily life in Europe -- which one leader quipped, had "nothing to do with what's happening in Saudi Arabia." The CRCM leaders emphasized the importance of "ijtihad" -- reinterpretation of sayings of the prophet Muhammad and other Qur'anic precepts subject to interpretation -- as an essential part of bringing Islam into harmony with the 21st century and Western locales. They also stressed a common refusal to recognize foreign fatwas and a shared desire to reduce dependency on foreign funding. CRCM representatives said that, ideally, they would like to

reduce foreign funding to zero, but in cases where this was not possible, they would ensure that donor governments like Morocco, Algeria and Turkey understood that they could not manage internal religious affairs in France the way they did at home. The FMNF representative defended some aspects of foreign government funding, noting that the Moroccan government funded five full-time Arabic teachers in his district who taught during the week at public schools and offered weekend Arabic instruction at mosques, without crossing over into Qur'anic instruction. The Rhone-Alpes CRCM members also stressed inter-faith dialogue as a common priority, with CRCM President Gaci affirming that respecting Jews and Christians was a religious obligation for all Muslims.

¶4. (C) The Lyon CRCM leaders, in contrast to many of our Paris-based Muslim contacts, expressed confidence in their ability to raise money locally, despite a generally low-income population base. They claimed that revenues from halal meat sales -- which they estimated to be a five billion euro a year market in Europe -- were a potential funding bonanza for religious projects in France, if a mechanism could be created to tax such sales and channel the proceeds into community projects. They noted that the Jewish community in France received sizable funding from similar taxes of kosher food sales. (Comment: In 2004, then-Interior Minister de Villepin floated the idea of using proceeds from halal meat sales to fund religious projects in France; the proposal never got off the ground and has not been a visible priority since Nicolas Sarkozy took over MOI again in June 2005. End comment.) Taxes on hajj travel by French citizens was another potential source of funding cited by the CRCM representatives; Bilal Grand Mosque (Paris Grand Mosque affiliated) President Abdelkader Bendidi noted that some

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26,000 French nationals traveled to Saudi Arabia annually for the hajj pilgrimage, surpassing Tunisia, and putting France on a par with Morocco and Algeria in numbers of hajj pilgrims.

¶5. (C) UOIF representative/CRCM President Azzedine Gaci described new mosque construction as a pressing need for French Muslims in the Rhone-Alpes area; he cited statistics that Germany has some 3,000 mosques for its population of 3 million Muslims, while France has only 1,600 mosques for its estimated Muslim population of 5 to 6 million. (Comment: Independent studies suggest that some two-thirds of the French Muslim population is non-practicing, which could explain the lower mosque numbers in France compared to Germany. End comment.) The CRCM meeting took place in the brand-new, UOIF-affiliated mosque in the Lyon suburb of Villeurbaine, which Gaci said was paid for entirely by local donations. (Comment: The Villeurbaine mosque is impressive in its size and dcor, and accommodates some 1,200 worshippers for Friday prayers. Facilities include a two-story prayer room with a separate floor for women, a library, and four classrooms providing Arabic language classes and religious instruction for children on weekends. We visited the mosque on a day off for French school children, and found the courtyard teeming with young children playing, with an even ratio between veiled and unveiled girls; inside a coed classroom of preschool-age children were rote learning a song in Arabic, in a scene which could have taken place in any Arab capital. End comment.)

¶6. (C) In another example of local fundraising, the FMNF representative proudly showed poloff photos of a new, 2.2 million euros mosque under construction in the Loire regional capital of St. Etienne, expected to open in 2007. Like Gaci, the FMNF representative claimed that the new mosque was funded entirely from local donations collected over the past 30 years, with some local donors of modest means contributing gold wedding jewelry in lieu of cash. The land for the new mosque was acquired in a land swap with the city of St. Etienne, which wanted to build a new concert center on the

grounds of the existing mosque.

¶7. (C) The Rhone-Alpes CRCM representatives posed numerous questions to poloff on Islam in the U.S. and U.S. foreign policy, which they conceded that many of their parishioners viewed as hostile to Muslims. In response to their questions, poloff briefed them on the history and composition of the U.S. Muslim population and the ways it differs from that of France, U.S. concepts of secularism and religious liberty, and the U.S. immigrant experience. Poloff stressed that Muslims are a vital part of the fabric of U.S. society, and that the U.S. has promoted the freedom and security of Muslim populations throughout the world, from Somalia, to Bosnia and Kosovo, to Afghanistan and Iraq. The meeting closed with the CRCM representatives expressing eagerness to continue dialogue with the embassy after this first encounter, and confirming willingness to receive more USG and private American delegations.

¶8. (C) Comment: While we have no doubt that the CRCM representatives were tailoring their message to a USG audience, we did view them as sincere in their stated desire to work together and their openness to greater dialogue with the U.S. Many local observers of Muslim community issues have speculated that the regional Muslim councils are "where the action is," as the CFCM at the national level continues to flounder, amid internal divisions and GOF meddling. We also note that the CRCM group described in this cable is not affiliated with Lyon Grand Mosque Rector Kamal Kaptane, who resigned as CRCM president in late 2004 and was the subject of an unusual MFA demarche reported reftel; according to media reports, Kaptane and current CRCM president Gaci remain bitter rivals. End comment.

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